

UPF Geneva, Switzerland: Religion – A Way to Peace or a Cause of Conflict?

Heiner Handschin and Juraj Lajda
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Geneva, Switzerland -- Prominent religious leaders spoke at a webinar titled "Religion – A Way to Peace or a Cause of Conflict?"

The conference was held on December 11, 2020, as a joint effort of the Europe and Middle East branches of UPF and the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD), a UPF association. The theme was based on the long history of conflict and struggle among different religions.

For the first session, held in German with translation into English, the moderator was Rabbi Kevin De-Carli, research assistant to IAPD of Europe and the Middle East. He also represents the Interfaith Youth Council of the Geneva Interfaith Intercultural Alliance (GIIA).

Rabbi De-Carli explained that the original plan for this conference to include a parallel youth panel could not be fulfilled because, as an officer of a paramedic military unit, he was ordered to combat the second wave of COVID-19 that is currently ravaging Switzerland and he couldn't mandate the original youth panel of GIIA for this conference.

Instead, to maintain an intergenerational element, the organizers invited a young Protestant pastor from Austria to act as a respondent. The youth audience was hoping for such a perspective to be included in the meeting.

As the first speaker of the panel, Rev. Dr. Simone Sinn of the Ecumenical Institute of Bogis-Bossey in Switzerland concisely presented 10 points affirming that religious actors either can be peacemakers or cause conflicts. Religions themselves are not the cause of anything, she said; it is the human actors who make the difference. She stated that debate must be inclusive, focusing not just on the strong majorities but taking into consideration the small and vulnerable ones as well. She emphasized the need for youth to be taught an interfaith perspective. Through these kinds of activities, religious extremism and intolerance can be addressed most efficiently, she said.

The next speaker was Gurdeep Singh Kundan, the founder of the Center for Sikh Studies in St. Gallen, Switzerland, a board member of the interfaith group Iras Cotis, and secretary general of the Global Council of Sikhism. Although religious differences historically have been the cause for conflict, it shouldn't be that way, he said. After conferences like this, he said, we should be concerned about practicing our great ideas and make sure there will be a follow-up. In Sikhism, he said, feeding all people is a mandate that goes beyond barriers of religion and faiths, and this activity can be seen as a means to

create a peaceful environment among human beings.

Heiner Handschin, the leader of both UPF-Switzerland and IAPD for Europe and the Middle East, pointed out that recent history shows the great potential of religions for peace efforts and conflict at the same time. This should make us think that we need each other to help overcome the "division into different compartments" of the different faiths and, related to that, the potential clash of perspectives of different cultures and civilizations.

Youth cannot relate easily to institutionalized religions, which they see as inflexible, he said. He mentioned the interesting concept of "home church" or family as a place of worship that could bridge the generation gaps and bring forth all that good potential of religions.



As the fourth speaker wasn't on the call yet, Pastor Markus Gerold of the Protestant community of Steyr, Austria, gave a short response to the words of the previous speakers.

Pastor Gerold said he also identified with the point of religion being part of the solution as well as part of the problem. In the current time of social instability, he said, there is a greater tendency toward fundamentalist and extreme forms of religions that seem to give greater stability and a sense of identity. It would be important for the moderate sides of religion to offer young people an alternative to counter these tendencies. Also there is a need for capacity building, he said, so that religions can become more plurality friendly rather than locking themselves down in narrow and inflexible traditions that don't seem to appeal to young people anymore.

After a lively discussion about human dignity and human ethos as a common point among religions, Professor Dr. Heiner Bielefeldt, the final speaker, joined the meeting. Dr. Bielefeldt is a professor of human rights and human rights policy at the University of Erlangen, Germany.

He pointed out that in these times religions have become known as having a great potential for conflict, division and struggle, as mentioned in John Lennon's song "Imagine." It even would be understandable to state that religions these days are rather on the side of the problem than the solution, he said, as they are seen in many places as a factor of division.

Dr. Bielefeldt stated that religions have a credibility problem, and many times they are really troublemakers. He said there is a need for in-depth self-criticism that can be seen as an appropriate response to the credibility issue.

He discussed the existing peace potential that actually does surface in many places, citing examples in Nigeria, Lebanon and Sierra Leone, where practical applications of the message of religions showed some very inspiring results. The religious "openheartedness" in those places went way beyond mere tolerance.

In conclusion he reiterated that religions' potential for conflict or peace is a fact. Through an attitude of rigorous self-critique, religions can become a source of great strength and real contributors to peace in the world.

The second session, which was held in English, was moderated by Chantal Komagata, the coordinator of UPF for Europe.

The first speaker was Rev. Michal Jablonski, pastor and director of the Evangelical Reformed Church in Warsaw, Poland. He explained that the creators of religions are people, not God. "Religion was born from questions," he said. "From thinking about the world [and] about ourselves."

The first clash, he said, comes from the fact that each religion claims its God is the only one and the best one. The second clash is derived from the concept of symbol, considered sacred, when loyalty to it became stronger than the self. The third clash is caused by the existence of different Holy Scriptures, the interpretation of which can divide people and lead to violent confrontations. "That is why we have, in modern countries, the separation of state and religion," he said.

Rev. Jablonski advocated remaining critical toward religion, cultivating the basic principles and taking responsibility. He concluded his talk by emphasizing the significant difference between religions and faith, which depends on our own personal relationship to God.

The following speaker was Hon. Ján Figel' from Slovakia, a former European Commission special envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion outside the European Union.

He said: "First of all, I think that religion is not the problem, but neither [is it] an automatic solution for peace. ... Religion is part of humanity, part of human history." He spoke about his time as a special envoy for the EU: "Freedom without responsibility will not work, it will die." He also said: "Religious leaders and faith-based organizations should promote openness of minds and hearts, and they should be very active in dialogue ... oriented toward truth, justice, [and the] common good." He also emphasized human rights for all and following the teachings of Jesus to love all people.

Martin Pilka from the Czech Republic, the national president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, began his talk by directly tackling the topic at hand: "I realize that it is our personal choice whether we are the way to peace, or a cause of conflict. ... Religion, generally, is not what decides whether the outcome is good or bad. ... It is our heart, [the] human heart, that makes the decision. The important factor is who prevails in our heart." He continued: "It is our responsibility as religious leaders, and for all of us, to make choices which bring God's light to the world." He encouraged the attendees to make good choices and decisions, in addition to being righteous examples for others.

Dr. Dieter Schmidt from Germany, the UPF director for Central Europe, started his talk by stating, "Peace is needed more today than at any time before." Speaking about the role of religion, he said: "Religion has the task to turn human beings toward goodness and to eliminate their evil nature that finds enjoyment in fighting. ... We have to realize we have a part of fallen nature in ourselves, and we need healing. As a doctor, religion is like a medicine: something we go through to be healthy again or, in religious terms, to be saved."

Dr. Schmidt emphasized the importance of studying the sacred scriptures of world religions, and he encouraged the strengthening of religious education. He spoke of his own experiences in UPF's Middle East Peace Initiative, which took place in Jerusalem in 2003. At that time representatives of Judaism, Islam and Christianity gathered together and gave a tribute to Jesus by symbolically removing the crown of thorns and giving him the crown of glory.

Dr. Schmidt stated that God, being a God of love behind all religions, is a Heavenly Parent. We should try to create one human family under God, he said. UPF co-founder Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon emphasizes the feminine aspect of God, he said. He concluded by saying, "I hope that we can work together, that we can understand other religions better, because there are so many beautiful ways of devotion."

The final part of the webinar was a question-and-answer session. Many insightful questions were posed to the panelists, who provided thoughtful answers in response.

Ms. Komagata, the session moderator, brought the webinar to a close by thanking the panelists who participated in the debate, before a video was shown of an interfaith water ceremony.

Joshua McGuigan, the press officer in the United Kingdom for Family Federation for World Peace and Unification, an affiliated organization; and Chantal Chételat Komagata, UPF coordinator for Europe, contributed to this report.